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ABSTRACT

This course guide is intended to help teachers introduce students to the basic concepts of readers' or interpreters' theatre. Performance objectives for the students are listed which include: (1) discerning the elements that make up a good choice of material, developing some understanding of how to adapt and arrange the material for readers' theatre; (2) analyzing the work and character(s) the student is to perform; and (3) employing the techniques necessary to perform the material in an effort to help the audience experience the literature. Also included are: "Course Content," which discusses the rationale for the course and the range of subject matter; "Teaching Strategies," which provides specific suggestions for teaching that will help the students attain the performance objectives (these include group and individual discussions, distinguishing features of types and styles of drama, oral reading of short plays, lectures, choral reading, and public presentation of a play); and "Student Responses," which lists state-adopted and supplementary materials for students' use. (WR)

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AUTHORIZED COURSE OF INSTRUCTION FOR THE **QUINMESTER PROGRAM**

DADE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

LANGUAGE ARTS

Readers' Theatre

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DIVISION OF INSTRUCTION • 1971

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LANGUAGE ARTS
(English, Drama)

Written
for the
DIVISION OF INSTRUCTION
Dade County Public Schools
Miami, Florida
1972

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COURSE
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COURSE TITLE: READERS' THEATRE

COURSE DESCRIPTION: This course introduces students to the basic concepts of readers' or interpreters' theatre. Students are involved in the actual selection, adaptation, and preparation of materials to be presented as well as in performance of the materials. Students of this course may also serve as resource personnel for other disciplines. (Examples: An English class is studying Lord of the Flies; physics class is studying the work of Galileo. One function of the readers' theatre class could be to prepare Lord of the Flies or Brecht's Galileo for presentation to the English class or the physics class.)

I. PERFORMANCE OBJECTIVES

- A. Given opportunities to discuss some concepts of readers' theatre, the student will discern the elements that make up a good choice of material developing some understanding of how to adapt and arrange the material for readers' theatre.
- B. Given time to read, study, and discuss material to be performed, the student will analyze the work and the character(s) that he is to perform.
- C. Given directoral conferences and rehearsal time, the student will employ the techniques necessary to effectively perform the material in an effort to help the audience experience the literature.

II. COURSE CONTENT

A. Rationale

Readers' theatre can be experienced and enjoyed by almost any age group. Something special usually happens to the group performing a readers' theatre presentation that does not always happen to the cast of a conventional play, and that is a feeling of total unity among the members. In readers' theatre, the entire cast is responsible for the total production. All of the members are usually on stage together to emphasize this. When readers' theatre is effective, a total sharing of both the literature and the emotion of the literature occurs between cast and audience.

Although the art of readers' theatre is considered by some to be one of the more advanced aspects of theatre, students of many grade levels and varying capabilities might participate in it and profit from it if guided by a skillful and understanding teacher. Students who are too shy to perform in a conventional dramatic presentation may be able to perform effectively in a readers' theatre presentation because of the support that they feel by being on stage with other

students and also by not having to move about the stage to perform involved movement and stage business.

Even students who have reading problems, if the problems are not too severe, may work effectively if encouraged by the teacher and other students.

B. Range of subject matter

1. Definitions of readers' theatre
2. Types of materials suitable for readers' theatre
 - a. Published readers' theatre scripts
 - b. Plays
 - c. Novels
 - d. Short stories
 - e. Poems
 - f. Biographies
 - g. Diaries
3. Choosing material for presentation
 - a. Level of performers and audience
 - b. Interesting characters
 - c. Fast paced dialogue
 - d. Suitability or appropriateness of language
 - e. Outward and inward action
 - f. Wholeness of play or material in cut version
4. Adapting material
 - a. Cutting to suitable length
 - b. Retaining significant scenes and dialogue
 - c. Keeping clarity of plot
 - d. Using a narrator
 - e. Bridging

- f. Retaining variety of mood
 - g. Insuring balance
 - h. Climactic arrangement of scenes
5. Analysis of material
- a. Study many sources for background
 - b. Director's interpretation or approach
 - c. Plot elements
 - d. Character analysis
6. Techniques to emphasize in preparing performance
- a. Vocal
 - b. Physical
 - c. Eye focus
 - d. Music
 - e. Sustaining the mood
7. Production problems
- a. Entrances and exits
 - b. Rehearsals
 - c. Stage arrangement
 - d. Lighting
 - e. Special effects (if used)
 - f. Costumes (if used)

III. TEACHING STRATEGIES

OBJECTIVE A: Given opportunities to discuss some concepts of readers' theatre, the student will discern the elements that make up a good choice of material developing some understanding of how to adapt and arrange the material for readers' theatre.

1. Open a discussion on theatre in order that students may tell of their background and experiences.
2. As part of this discussion, have students tell about the following:
 - a. Their most memorable experience in theatre
 - b. Different kinds of theatrical presentations that they have seen
3. Have students discuss the meaning of theatre as aesthetic experience.
4. Have students individually or in groups give a description of a situation they have observed in life. Each group or individual should establish the setting, characters, mood, and action of the situation that is described.
5. Introduce to, or review for, students the distinguishing features of types and styles of drama.
 - a. Examples of types: comedy, tragedy, melodrama, farce, fantasy, comedy of manners, social drama
 - b. Examples of styles: realism, naturalism, romanticism, expressionism, symbolism, allegory
6. After assigning the various parts, have students read aloud in class several short plays of various types. Ask students to point out in discussion the plays that contain elements that make them suitable for readers' theatre. Such elements might include the following:
 - a. Involved plot
 - b. Interesting characters
 - c. Fast paced and lively dialogue
 - d. Absence of intricate stage business

Students should also be made aware of elements that make plays unsuitable for readers' theatre.

7. Present to the class a brief lecture on readers' theatre based on information from the Course Guide of the Secondary School Conference, and Readers' Theatre Handbook and pp. 40-41 from The Stage and the School. Emphasize how readers' theatre differs from conventional theatre in regard to such aspects as the following:

- Movement
- Business
- Stage setting
- Costumes
- Length of presentation
- Arrangement of scenes

Emphasize the similarities of readers' theatre with conventional theatre. Include such points as the following:

- Analysis of material to be presented
- Vocal techniques
- Rehearsals
- Outward and inward action
- Polished production
- Memorization of lines

8. Have students discuss the statement "Reading a play is less time consuming than reading a novel." Ask students to give several reasons for their opinions.
9. On the basis of the background that students have gathered, cooperatively develop with them the definition of readers' theatre under which the class will operate.
10. Have students make an evaluation of their prospective audience (students and community) in terms of interests and entertainment tastes. On the basis of this evaluation, have students suggest some plays or stories that they might want to adapt for presentation.
11. Ask students to evaluate the room in which the readers' theatre offerings will be presented at school (classroom, little theatre, large auditorium, etc.). Have students discuss the assets and limitations of the physical setting for their presentations.
12. Have the students do some choral reading of familiar poems.
13. Provide the students with a large variety of scripts and allow time for free reading of plays.
14. Divide the class into several groups. Provide each group with sufficient copies of a script (of their own choice, if possible) that students might adapt for a readers' theatre performance.

Have students understand that this exercise will result in class performances. Work with each group in helping them to prepare their scripts. Allow sufficient time, several days if necessary, for students to complete preparations. Permit students to choose a student director for each group.

15. Before students are fully involved in the activity described in #14, review with them the basic considerations that must be made in preparing for readers' theatre performance. Emphasize the following:
 - a. There should be general discussion of the theme, plot, characters, and adaptation to be used. Ask students to try to come to common agreement on the overall interpretation to be used to help insure clarity and smoothness of production.
 - b. Students should be able to outline the plot according to the elements of play structure by delineating the exposition, initial incident, rising action, climax and denouement.
 - c. When parts have been assigned, each player should conduct background research and make an in-depth analysis of the character(s) that he is to portray.
 - d. Each group should conduct several readings of the script that they are using. One reading each for plot, character, theme, and imagery might suffice.
 - e. Limit students to very short plays for this exercise.
 - f. Each group should set up and adhere to a strict rehearsal schedule in order that the presentations may be presented as planned.
 - g. Emphasize to the students that although the play books are used on stage, they are expected to memorize their lines early so that they might polish their characterizations.
 - h. Several days in advance of the class production, invite an English class to view these class presentations. (When players are assured of an audience, they are sometimes more highly motivated.)
16. Before these in-class presentations are made, cooperatively develop with the students some criteria for evaluation of their performances.
17. Permit students to present their productions. Expose students to the process of receiving a critique of their work.

18. Ask the teacher of the invited English class to permit her class to write brief reactions to the presentations. Bring these written reactions back to the readers' theatre class. Allow time for students to read and discuss them.

OBJECTIVE B: Given time to read, study, and discuss material to be performed, the student will analyze the work and the character(s) that he is to perform.

1. Review in some depth definitions of the following terms:

character	dialogue
characterization	bridging
narrator	initial incident
climax	rising action
denouement	chorus (as in Greek plays)
exposition	falling action
plot	

If necessary, refer students to pp. 253-254 and pp. 504-513 in The Stage and the School.

Through discussion insure that the students have a thorough understanding of the definitions of these terms that the director (teacher) will use.

2. Through try-outs and other means such as assessment of student talent and community tastes, select one or two works that may now be adapted for public presentation.

3. Some suggested works for readers' theatre presentation are listed below.

- a. Published works intended to be presented as readers' theatre

<u>Brecht on Brecht</u>	<u>Spoon River Anthology</u>
<u>Don Juan in Hell</u>	<u>John Brown's Body</u>
<u>The Investigation</u>	<u>Under Milkwood</u>
<u>Telemachus Clay</u>	<u>The World of Carl Sandburg</u>
<u>A Whitman Portrait</u>	<u>Thurber Carnival</u>

- b. Plays from the conventional theatre that deal mainly with character motivation

<u>Our Town</u>	<u>The Cherry Orchard</u>
<u>Medea (Robinson Jeffers version)</u>	<u>Joan of Lorraine</u>
<u>The Caine Mutiny Court Martial</u>	<u>Outward Bound</u>
<u>The Devil and Daniel Webster</u>	<u>Quality Street</u>
<u>Inherit the Wind</u>	<u>The Heiress</u>

c. Novels and short stories

<u>Oliver Twist</u>	<u>To Build a Fire</u>
<u>Great Expectations</u>	<u>Huckleberry Finn</u>
<u>To Kill a Mockingbird</u>	<u>A Start in Life</u>
<u>The Necklace</u>	

d. Poems

Single long poems ("Evangeline," "The Courtship of Miles Standish")

Series of poems by a single poet with narration

Series of short poems on a single theme

e. Biographies, diaries, etc.

The teacher should feel free to use material not listed here so long as it is suitable for adaptation to readers' theatre requirements and so long as it meets standards of good taste.

4. Refer to pp. 29-39 of Readers' Theatre Handbook by Cogger and White for special help in adapting any type of work to readers' theatre.
5. When final selection of the script(s) is completed, hold try-outs for the parts.
6. Permit students to make suggestions, and if possible incorporate some of these suggestions as the final adaptation and/or rewrite is done on the script.
7. Discuss the role of the narrator in readers' theatre. Explain to the class what is meant by bridging. A discussion of the chorus as used by the ancient Greek playwrights will help to emphasize the role of the narrator. The opening section of the Robinson Jeffers version of Euripides' Medea is a good selection for students to read as an example of the narrator-character. (The nurse is the character to be read.)
8. Review with students such basic acting techniques as loosening the body, showing emotional response, special techniques for old age, etc. Use whatever source you like best for acting methods or techniques. There are very good sections on acting in both of the following listed state-adopted textbooks: The Stage and the School and Acting: The Creative Process.
9. In discussion, assist students in identifying the protagonist and antagonist of the work to be presented. Try to insure a full understanding of the following:

conflict
relationship of characters
motivation of characters

10. Have students research the period in which the work is set. Any information relative to manners, morality, mode of dress, and politics of the time of a work (play, novel, short story, etc.) may help students create greater depth for their characterizations.
11. Have each actor analyze his part as thoroughly as he can as he prepares for production. A rather simple way for inexperienced actors to analyze a character is done in three steps. The character is analyzed through:
 - a. What he says
 - b. What he does
 - c. What other characters say about him
12. Have each actor write a character sketch of the character that he is to read in the production.
13. Conduct several complete readings of the entire script with all members of the cast together. Freely answer questions that students may ask about the play or the characters or the adaptation used.

OBJECTIVE C: Given directoral conferences and rehearsal time, the student will employ the techniques necessary to effectively perform the material in an effort to help the audience experience the literature.

1. Review stage areas and movement with the actors. Give special emphasis to symbolic stage movement.
2. Establish early with the actors the manner in which the stage is to be set. If lecterns, high stools, or other special set pieces are to be used, have students begin to rehearse with them early so that any undesirable appearance of awkwardness may be avoided.
3. Emphasize to students as they begin to memorize the parts that they must employ techniques of acting in readers' theatre just as they would in conventional theatre. Stress the following:
 - a. An actor must listen to other actors.
 - b. An actor must react to the words of other actors.

- c. The actor's body must at all times suggest the mood of the scene.
 - d. An actor must use all vocal techniques within his power to make his character "live".
4. Help students to avoid dull or listless reading of parts even at early rehearsals by insisting on in-character readings at all times.
 5. Early in rehearsals have actors begin to work together to help insure a coordinated and cohesive production. Working together as a group implies much more than merely rehearsing together.
 6. Appoint a production staff for the presentation very early. Ask them to attend all rehearsals and begin early on the work that they must do such as lighting, special effects, sound, etc.
 7. Discuss early in the rehearsal phases such essentials as gestures, use of the playbook as prop, exits, entrances, and lighting.
 8. Help students to work for vocal variety in the earliest phases of rehearsal. Refer to Chapter 9 of The Stage and the School.
 9. Assign speech improvement exercises to the actors. Avoid making general assignments. Assign specific exercises to students who have problems that will be helped by the exercises.
 10. Have students work for projection so that they can easily be heard during the presentation. Unless a public address system is very sophisticated, microphones will often detract from a production of readers' theatre.
 11. Discuss eye focus with actors and have them early in rehearsals work for desired eye focus.
 12. Have students record short segments of the overall production. Use playback of these taped sessions to help students improve any difficulties that they may be experiencing with pronunciation, breath control, or expression of emotion.
 13. Establish early with students how entrances and exits are to be handled, that is, whether physically or with lights.
 14. If the director decides that music will enhance the production, involve the students in the selection of the music. Help students to recognize the relationship between suitability of both the music and the instruments on which it is played to the overall production.

(Example: Do not use an electronic guitar to accompany or provide background for a period play such as The Barretts of Wimpole Street unless a very unusual or out of balance effect is desired.)

15. Through discussion with the students, cooperatively decide or use the director's prerogative to decide on what manner of dress the players will wear for the production. (Players dress may range all the way from modern dress to full costume appropriate to the period of the play.)
16. If special effects such as rear stage projection techniques are to be used, begin to rehearse with these effects early enough so that technical operation is smooth and so that changing images or colors do not distract the actors.
17. Refer to pp. 46-50 of the Readers' Theatre Handbook for background information on "onstage focus" and "offstage focus". Discuss this principle with students as they try to establish for themselves and the audience the "plane of imagination".
18. Advertise and publicize a readers' theatre production just as enthusiastically as you would a conventional play.
19. Prepare a program for use during the production. Use any program notes that will help the audience toward a greater understanding and/or appreciation of the group's efforts.

IV. STUDENT RESOURCES

A. State-adopted textbooks

Albright, Hardie. Acting: The Creative Process. Belmont, California: Dickenson Publishing Co., 1967.

Beck, Roy et al. Play Production in the High School. Skokie, Illinois: National Textbook Co., 1968.

Ommanney, Katherine. The Stage and the School. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1960.

B. Supplementary materials

Barnes and Sutcliffe. On Stage, Everyone. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1961.

Cosgrove, Frances. Scenes for Student Actors Series. New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1958.

V. TEACHER RESOURCES

A. State-adopted textbooks

(See student list)

B. Supplementary materials

Coger, Leslie Irene and Melvin R. White. Readers' Theatre Handbook. Glenville, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1967.

Lee, Charlotte. Oral Interpretation. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1952.

Lowrey, Sara and Gertrude Johnson. Interpretive Reading. Techniques and Selections. New York: Appleton-Century Co., 1942.

Spolin, Viola. Improvisation for the Theatre. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1963.

Thompson, David W. and Virginia Fredericks. Oral Interpretation of Fiction. Burgess Publishing Co., 1964.

Course Guide of the Secondary School Theatre Conference.